

Message Text

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ACTION EUR-12

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 PA-01 ICA-11

SP-02 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /038 W

-----109920 162028Z /15

P 151900Z AUG 78

FM AMCONSUL QUEBEC

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1425

INFO AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY

AMCONSUL MONTREAL

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PGOV, CA

SUBJECT: FANCY CAPE WORK AT REGINA

REF: OTTAWA 3949

1. THIS CABLE INCLUDES MONTREAL PRESS REACTION.

2. RENE LEVESQUE AND CLAUDE MORIN RETURNED FROM REGINA OVER THE WEEKEND IN AN EBULLIENT MOOD. LAST YEAR AT THIS TIME AT THE FIRST MINISTERS CONFERENCE AT ST. ANDREWS, NEW BRUNSWICK, THE NINE OTHER PROVINCIAL PREMIERS, WITH THE QUIET SUPPORT OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT, HAD UNANIMOUSLY REJECTED THE GOQ'S OFFER TO NEGOTIATE LANGUAGE-OF-EDUCATION AGREEMENTS WITH INDIVIDUAL PROVINCES. QUEBEC WAS ISOLATED. THIS YEAR, THE PICTURE IS DIFFERENT. THE TEN PROVINCES, WITH QUEBEC CONSPICUOUSLY ON BOARD, HAVE UNANIMOUSLY DENOUNCED MAJOR PORTIONS OF OTTAWA'S CONSTITUTIONAL PROPOSALS, INCLUDING LALONDE/LANG SUGGESTIONS THAT OTTAWA MIGHT OVERRIDE THE DECISIONS OF PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS BY APPEALING DIRECTLY TO THE POPULATION OF A PROVINCE BY MEANS OF REFERENDA.

3 IN CONTRAST TO PREVIOUS FEDERAL/PROVINCIAL CONFERENCES,

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NOTABLY LAST FEBRUARY'S MEETING ON THE ECONOMY WHEN LEVESQUE STORMED NOISILY OUT IN MID-CONFERENCE, LEVESQUE WAS SWEET COOPERATION IN REGINA. THE SHOW OF INTER-PROVINCIAL UNITY EARNED LEVESQUE UNIFORMLY FAVORABLE NOTICES BACK HOME. EDITORIALISTS PURRED THAT THE GOQ WAS CONDUCTING ITSELF IN THE MANNER OF A GOOD GOVERNMENT WHICH, AFTER ALL, IS WHAT IT WAS ELECTED TO DO. THE PROVINCES, PARTLY THANKS TO MR. LANG, WERE DEMONSTRATING

THAT THEY COULD WORK TOGETHER TO RESIST THE ARROGANT UNILATERALISM OF THE FEDS. AND QUEBEC WAS PLAYING ALONG, EVEN GOING SO FAR AS TO STATE THAT A RADICALLY "DECENTRALIZED FEDERALISM" COULD CONSTITUTE A "SERIOUS ALTERNATIVE" TO THE PQ'S SOVEREIGNTY-ASSOCIATION. THIS PRONOUNCEMENT BROUGHT FORTH A WELTER OF DIFFERING REACTIONS IN THE LOCAL PRESS, WITH THE MONTREAL GAZETTE STOPPING JUST SHORT OF CALLING LEVESQUE A CLOSET FEDERALIST, AND LE JOURNAL DE QUEBEC CHORTLING THAT LEVESQUE HAD SIMPLY CONNED HIS FELLOW PREMIERS AND HAD THEM EATING OUT OF HIS HAND. IN ALL CASES, THE EDITORIAL TONE WAS APPROVING, WITH ONLY LE SOLEIL'S MARCEL PEPIN COMPLAINING MILDLY THAT THE PROVINCIAL PREMIERS HAD BEEN TOO UNIFORMLY CRITICAL OF OTTAWA AND SHOULD COME UP WITH SOME POSITIVE IDEAS OF THEIR OWN, INCLUDING FINDING SOME WAY TO ENSHRINE THE "QUEBEC DIMENSION" IN A NEW CONSTITUTION. OTHERWISE, LEVESQUE EARNED HIGH MARKS ACROSS THE BOARD. THE THREE MAJOR FRANCOPHONE DAILIES HAILED THE "POSITIVE SPIRIT OF REGINA" AND THE GOQ'S NEW SPIRIT OF COOPERATION. AND THERE WAS HARDLY A QUIVER FROM THE ULTRAS WITHIN AND WITHOUT THE PQ, WHO SEEMED TO BE HAPPY WITH ANYTHING DISCOMFITING TRUDEAU AND OTTAWA. THE OPPOSITION PARTIES IN QUEBEC HAVE ALSO BEEN SILENCED BY LEVESQUE'S NEW FOUND SPIRIT OF COOPERATION.

4. COMMENT: SOME OBSERVERS, PARTICULARLY THOSE WHOSE PRIMARY FOCUS IS FEDERAL POLITICS, HAVE ASCRIBED LEVESQUE'S APPARENT SHIFT IN TACTICS TO HIS WISH TO DENY TRUDEAU THE NATIONAL LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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UNITY ISSUE IN THE NEXT ELECTION. NO DOUBT THERE IS SOMETHING TO THIS. NONETHELESS, IT NEGLECTS REALITIES OF LEVESQUE'S OWN POLITICAL SITUATION IN QUEBEC. REACTION TO LEVESQUE'S WALKOUT LAST FEBRUARY IN OTTAWA WAS UNEXPECTEDLY STRONG. POLLS TAKEN AFTER THIS DRAMATIC EVENT SHOWED A SIGNIFICANT DECLINE IN SUPPORT FOR THE PQ AND FOR SOVEREIGNTY-ASSOCIATION. (SEE QUEBEC 0218) ANALYSIS OF POLL RESULTS SEEMED INDICATE LOSS OF CONFIDENCE IN POSSIBILITY OF ACHIEVING ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION WAS MAJOR FACTOR IN DECLINING SUPPORT FOR SOVEREIGNTIST OPTION. AFTER POLLS WERE PUBLISHED HEAVY GLOOM SET IN AMONG PEQUISTES, INCLUDING LEVESQUE, AS THEY PERCEIVED CHANCES OF SUCCESSFUL REFERENDUM AND PROSPECTS OF REELECTION TO BE IN SERIOUS JEOPARDY.

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INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 INR-10 NSAE-00 PA-01 ICA-11
SP-02 OMB-01 TRSE-00 /038 W
-----101143 162029Z /15

P 151900Z AUG 78
FM AMCONSUL QUEBEC
TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1426
INFO AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY
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5. A CHANGE OF TACTICS, THEREFORE, WAS OBVIOUSLY CALLED FOR, AIMED AT REASSURING THE SKITTISH BUT ELECTORALLY CRUCIAL PORTION OF THE VOTING POPULATION (THE "CONDITIONAL SOVEREIGNTISTS") WHOSE ATTITUDE TOWARDS SOVEREIGNTY DEPENDS GREATLY ON CONVINCING ASSURANCES OF CONTINUED ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION WITH THE REST OF CANADA. A DOWNPLAYING OF SEPARATISM SEEMS TO BE THE CHOSEN PLOY AS IT WAS FOLLOWING THE PQ'S ELECTORAL DISASTER IN 1973. MOREOVER, AN ATTEMPT IS BEING MADE TO MINIMIZE THE PUBLIC'S PERCEPTION OF THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SOVEREIGNTY-ASSOCIATION AND A REVISED FORM OF FEDERALISM.

6. IN CANADA, AS ELSEWHERE, MOST LISTENERS TEND TO HEAR, OR AT LEAST INTERPRET WHAT THEY HEAR, IN A WAY THAT MOST PLEASES THEM. HOWEVER, THOSE WHO LISTENED CAREFULLY WITH THEIR PEQUISTES DECODING DEVICES WELL TUNED TO LEVESQUE AND CLAUDE MORIN IN REGINA WILL NOTE THAT BOTH WERE SCRUPULOUS IN ADDING CAVEATS TO ALL STATEMENTS THAT GOQ CONTINUES PURSUE ITS SOVEREIGNTIST GOALS. THUS, FEDERALISTS WOULD BE WELL ADVISED WATCH THIS PAIR OF SLEIGHT OF HAND ARTISTS BEFORE ASSUMING THAT THEY HAVE HAD CHANGE OF HEART REGARDING SEPARATISM OR REALLY HAVE BEEN CLOSET FEDERALISTS ALL ALONG. MOST PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION FOR THEIR SHIFT IN TACTICS IS ELECTORAL NECESSITY, INCLUDING ABOVE ALL THE NECESSITY OF DEMONSTRATING THAT QUEBEC

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CAN FIND COMMON GROUND WITH THE OTHER PROVINCES WITH WHOM IT WILL EVENTUALLY WANT TO NEGOTIATE "ASSOCIATION." AS IN THE PAST, GOQ MAY APPEAR TO TAKE ONE STEP AWAY FROM SEPARATISM IN HOPES OF QUIETLY MOVING TWO STEPS CLOSER WHEN ELECTORATE IS LESS ALERT. AS OTHER SIMILARLY SUBTLE MINDS HAVE NOTED IN PAST, A STRAIGHT LINE MAY NOT ALWAYS BE SUREST OR QUICKEST ROUTE BETWEEN TWO POINTS.

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Message Attributes

Automatic Decaptioning: X
Capture Date: 01 jan 1994
Channel Indicators: n/a
Current Classification: UNCLASSIFIED
Concepts: AGREEMENTS, EDUCATION, MEETINGS, POLITICAL LEADERS, NEGOTIATIONS, LANGUAGE & AREA TRAINING
Control Number: n/a
Copy: SINGLE
Draft Date: 15 aug 1978
Decaption Date: 01 jan 1960
Decaption Note:
Disposition Action: RELEASED
Disposition Approved on Date:
Disposition Case Number: n/a
Disposition Comment: 25 YEAR REVIEW
Disposition Date: 20 Mar 2014
Disposition Event:
Disposition History: n/a
Disposition Reason:
Disposition Remarks:
Document Number: 1978QUEBEC00275
Document Source: CORE
Document Unique ID: 00
Drafter: n/a
Enclosure: n/a
Executive Order: N/A
Errors: N/A
Expiration:
Film Number: D780335-0811
Format: TEL
From: QUEBEC
Handling Restrictions: n/a
Image Path:
ISecure: 1
Legacy Key: link1978/newtext/t19780863/aaaacajb.tel
Line Count: 170
Litigation Code IDs:
Litigation Codes:
Litigation History:
Locator: TEXT ON-LINE, ON MICROFILM
Message ID: 1aff8563-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Office: ACTION EUR
Original Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Original Handling Restrictions: n/a
Original Previous Classification: n/a
Original Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Page Count: 4
Previous Channel Indicators: n/a
Previous Classification: LIMITED OFFICIAL USE
Previous Handling Restrictions: n/a
Reference: 78 OTTAWA 3949
Retention: 0
Review Action: RELEASED, APPROVED
Review Content Flags:
Review Date: 05 may 2005
Review Event:
Review Exemptions: n/a
Review Media Identifier:
Review Release Date: N/A
Review Release Event: n/a
Review Transfer Date:
Review Withdrawn Fields: n/a
SAS ID: 1736556
Secure: OPEN
Status: NATIVE
Subject: FANCY CAPE WORK AT REGINA
TAGS: PGOV, CA, (LEVESQUE, RENE), (MORIN, CLAUDE)
To: STATE
Type: TE
vdkgvwkey: odbc://SAS/SAS.dbo.SAS_Docs/1aff8563-c288-dd11-92da-001cc4696bcc
Review Markings:
Sheryl P. Walter
Declassified/Released
US Department of State
EO Systematic Review
20 Mar 2014
Markings: Sheryl P. Walter Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 20 Mar 2014